TRIBUTE

Tony Daniels told the truth and did the work

We are here
We are proud Black Gay men
Standing tall with our heads
held high.

—*From "We Are Here"*
by Tony Daniels

by DUNCAN TEAGUE

A cannonball shot ripped through the middle of a community.

That is the image that has stayed with me as I've tried to come to some kind of understanding about "the loss" of Tony Daniels.

Loss is the word most often used by many African-Americans around the death of a loved one or someone of significance. It also appropriately speaks to the sentiment of many in the small, connected group of leaders in the Atlanta African-American queer community who knew and loved and admired Tony.

Every one of us was in some way linked to Tony—either by choice or obligation—so his death has left the folks who take responsibility and who risk taking action in the community wondering what to do without him.

The loss of Tony Daniels has riveted the larger queer community. This horrible incident has left untouched by grief few among Atlanta's organizers.

He died after suffering a traumatic brain injury during a car

artist, so he was in demand.

His loss has riveted others from the larger queer community. This horrible incident has left untouched by grief few among Atlanta's organizers. They feel something akin to the grief felt for a dignitary or a famous and popular artist. Folks who recognized his authority and position but did not know him feel something profound, too.

So how did a 33 year-old black gay man, born and bred in Albany, Georgia, get to such a place of significance?

Tony got to his place of regard and position in our community by doing two things that, while simple, often elude those seeking to make a difference.

He told the truth, and he did the work. Really plain old, common sense kind of stuff, but profound, nonetheless.

He told the truth

Tony was a 13-year survivor of HIV/AIDS, and he told the truth about being positive and having AIDS to audiences at AIDS 101 workshops and at presentations, to other brothers trying (or not trying) to cope with their own health issues and their own denials, conflicts and fears.

"I got HIV from having unprotected sex with another black gay

Collective. But when we, ADODI Muse, evolved into the performance group, A Gay Negro Ensemble, the commitment to tell our truth was still the basis of our shows and the driving motivation behind Tony's desire to "let the children have it."

When I would try to give a more moderate tone to our shows or pieces, that was one of Tony's responses. He had several other responses I would rather not mention here.

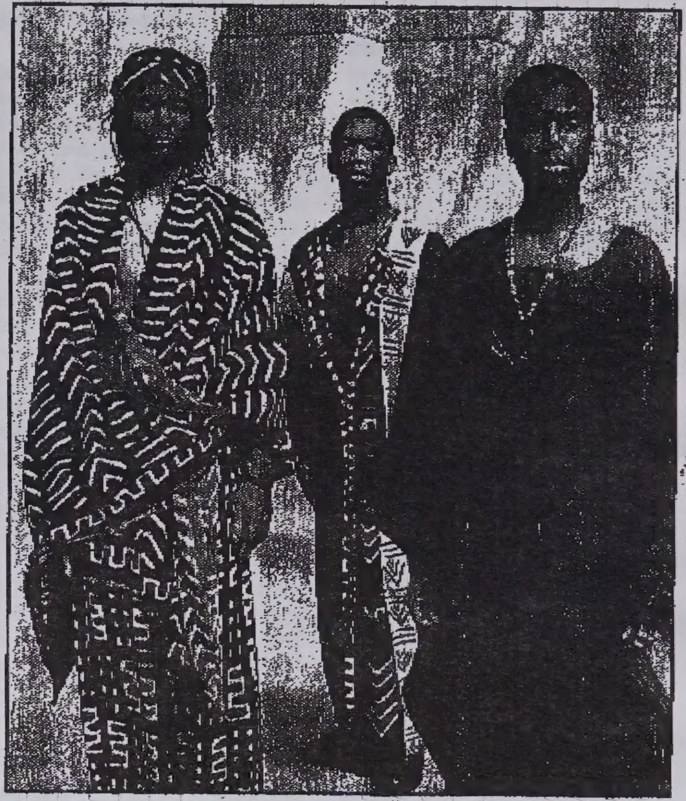
Tony and I were often at odds about our differences in style. We fueled the artistic energy of ADODI Muse with our determination, our conflicts and sometimes loud voices. Here, loud voices is not a metaphor, it is reality. Malik Williams was sent to us to be the one in the middle. Well, he is talented also.

The three of us, with our unique yet harmonious styles, blended to form ADODI Muse. Sometimes the harmony of styles was sharp, but after three years as successful artists, we grew to love each other.

The cannonball flew very hard through our dream of ADODI Muse. We never imagined it without Tony, so soon.

One twist of fate that is humorous and difficult to believe, if you did not know Tony, was that ADODI Muse was at times represented by one of us, and it was Tony.

There were other times, due to scheduling conflicts, that it was represented by two of us: Tony and Malik or Tony and me, but



ADODI Muse: Tony Daniels, Duncan Teague, Malik Williams

He did the work

Among progressive folks, there is the stolen phrase about "walking to talk." When the Atlanta Lambda Center opened its doors, there was no funding for a staff person. Tony volunteered to fill that void under the strained conditions of a brand new center

Before his death, Tony was planning on a shift that would help sustain him better physically than his schedule had before. Ironically, his health had been improving. He was back to a body weight many had never seen him maintain—almost robust.

He had plenty of energy, and

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He died after suffering a traumatic brain injury during a car accident Memorial Day Weekend. He was on his way to Washington, D.C. for that city's Black Gay Pride Celebration and for a collaboration meeting of Black Pride organizers from across the country. I've since learned from national leaders like Mandy Carter that the idea for the meeting was one of Tony's many lasting contributions.

At the time of his death, Tony had actually planned to become more focused, rather than spreading the same energy into the myriad of community projects he started or helped maintain.

In the past, even when he should have been checked into a hospital, he would run the schedule for In The Life Atlanta, put together some new show for ADODI Muse, argue with a newly-diagnosed queen about taking control of his health care, do something with Positive Impact or talk with nationally-known folks on the phone about some new or old idea he had.

People were drawn to his intelligence, drive, and ability. He was a respected public speaker and

"I got HIV from having unprotected sex with another black gay man with HIV," he would honestly proclaim. He wanted the truth of how this epidemic is being spread in our community out there.

Tony proudly put the words in poetry and plays about our lives as black men loving other men, and as black men who have sex with other men—all without regard for self-identification or comfort level about sexual orientation.

He told his story to a few politicians and political leaders, but he had little patience for their version of the truth.

I believe when he and Jerel Cooper founded ADODI Muse, it was so simply about telling the truth of our lives. That is what motivated them to form a collective of black gay Atlanta writers.

The stories of gay Southern men of African decent, during this epidemic especially, have been lost to the silence of the closet and the physical death of the willing and artfully capable.

Black Ink is currently what became of the writers collective ADODI Muse, an Outsiders

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There were other times, due to scheduling conflicts, that it was represented by two of us: Tony and Malik or Tony and me, but never without Tony.

The first time Malik and I stood as ADODI Muse without Tony, he was in fact still the center of attention. It was at his funeral in Albany.

Once when Tony was hospitalized with pneumonia, Malik and I foresaw with apprehension that much later, after we had accomplished so many other things, we would have to deal with an opportunistic infection that would change us all forever—but not a car accident.

By the way, Tony said, "AIDS will never kill me."

Malik and I are continuing as ADODI Muse, A Gay Negro Ensemble, mainly out of fear of never being allowed to sleep if we did not.

Tony had an astute view of the world. He would also tell the truth of his economic status as a man living on the financial assistance given to persons living with full blown AIDS. He would remind us of our work to deal with class issues as well as sexual orientation and gay issues.

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He did the work

Among progressive folks, there is the stolen phrase about "walking to talk." When the Atlanta Lambda Center opened its doors, there was no funding for a staff person. Tony volunteered to fill that void under the strained conditions of a brand new center opening for the first time.

He also created an institution in the community called SpeakFire that has for more than a year now opened a space for Afriqueer poets, writers, and artists to come and share their work. SpeakFire was his idea, his work, his talent, his very appreciated and loved success. It has featured nationally known writers like G.B. Mann, James Earl Hardy, and G. Winston James.

When the energy once again gathered to do something with the historic, black queer party weekend in Atlanta over Labor Day, Tony offered to act as executive director of In The Life Atlanta's 1997 Celebration of Black Gay Pride.

I also remember how—frustrated, mad, physically ill, fed up and about "to go off"—he would still offer his concern and care to a brother who would be in full-blown chaos over his HIV status or AIDS diagnosis.

He was not always gentle and would honestly let the weak-at-heart know he was not one to hold a self-hating or "satisfied with ignorance" hand too long.

Before his death, Tony was planning on a shift that would help sustain him better physically than his schedule had before. Ironically, his health had been improving. He was back to a body weight many had never seen him maintain—almost robust.

He had plenty of energy, and something about his very presence seemed so much more calm. This compared favorably with the nervous-but-determined-to-do-it-no-matter-what spirit he exhibited over previous years we worked together.

Our loss

The Atlanta community will be suffering from the loss of Tony's truth and work for years to come. It is a struggle just figuring out what to do with the wound, individually and collectively.

We are not to sit and do nothing—of that I am sure—and we won't. We loved him too much and cared too much about what Tony built and what he made of his own life.

I suppose he would have us tell the truth and do the work. Courage and love to all of us in his profound memory.

Duncan Teague is a long-time organizer in Atlanta's gay and black gay communities, and he works as the research coordinator for the Young African-American Men Project at Georgia State University.